The Fourth Church Pulpit

REMARKS: A CELEBRATION HONORING BETTY C. RENEKER

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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First, I'd like to take this opportunity to do something I've never been able to do before and something I think about a lot; actually I'd like to thank the Chicago Theological Seminary and the Chicago Theological Seminary Community. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that I am a minister, albeit a Presbyterian, because of C.T.S.

If truth be known I got to Chicago in the first place because a wise college adviser told me that Chicago Theological Seminary and the Divinity School (which at that point in history were involved in a kind of four-part marriage, and which I thought was very exciting, and which came flying apart just as soon as we unpacked) was a good place to ask the kind of questions I was asking without anyone hassling me about committing myself to professional ministry which was something I was not about to do.

Well, Wayne Glick said that I'd get a good theological education, and nobody would pressure me to become anything I didn't want to or feel called to become. That turned out to be true and there is no doubt in my mind that it is why I found myself deciding, a few years later, to seek ordination in my own Church.

Chicago Theological Seminary was great. For reasons I could never quite fathom, C.T.S. opened its arms and welcomed Sue and me — and we weren't much — broke, pregnant and very young. C.T.S. gave me a fellowship for tuition, and a job as head resident of our big married student house, Kimbark House. And Sue worked for Elsie McFadden in President Schomer's office, and the next summer I worked on a crew that renovated apartments for more married students and learned most of what I know about home maintenance. And when the almost genetic draw of Presbyterianism began to arise in me, my mentors and friends at Chicago Theological Seminary supported and applauded.

They are my/our saints: Bob Moore, Phil and Phoebe Anderson, Perry Lefevour, Vic Obenhaus, Jo Davis, Elsie McFadden.

So thank you, Chicago Theological Seminary.

I'm particularly pleased to be a part of these festivities, bringing together two people who in their commitments and service and absolute determination to bring the Christian faith into dynamic encounter with the realities of the world have left their stamp on this Institution and this City, and in a way, symbolize the historic mission and presence of the Chicago Theological Seminary ... Betty Reneker and Graham Taylor, whose names and ministries appropriately are remembered in the Graham Taylor Award. You hear and see Taylor's name a lot around Chicago Theological Society; I was glad for the opportunity to refresh my memory.

Graham Taylor came to Chicago from Hartford Seminary where he was a pioneer in a new academic discipline — Religious Sociology or the Sociology of Religion. Although on second thought, I'm sure Wydick Schroeder and Vic Obenhaus would have told us there is a difference between them. In any event, Taylor came to Chicago Theological Seminary to teach it, and it was Chicago Theological Seminary which first established a department exclusively to focus on the new discipline — Religious Sociology.

What a unique time and what a critically important gesture in the long history of Christianity's love/hate relationship with the world. McGiffert wrote that behind the movement and Taylor's involvement was "the long ethical thrust of Calvinism with its insistence that without religion communities fall apart."

McGiffert cites a resolution passed by the first council of Congregational Churches in 1867 which observed that "it was the grand peculiarity of our Puritan fathers that they applied the principles of the Gospel to elevate society, to regulate education, to civilize humanity, to purify law, to reform the Church and the State — in short to mold and redeem by its all- transforming energy everything that belongs to (humankind) in individual and social relations."

Taylor believed and proclaimed an unapologetically social Gospel, and for the life of me I have never been able to locate any other Gospel with any integrity and faithfulness to it.

Taylor not only taught and wrote a daily column for the *Chicago Daily News,* he organized as well: a Settlement House called Chicago Commons, the Civic Federation, and the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy — the forerunner of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, and he became a progressive activist who once publicly stood with his barber who had been fired for refusing to work on Sunday. As an urban pastor he one time hired a wagon and played his trumpet on the street corner, and in Chicago he was not, as we have come to experience and expect, universally applauded. As a matter of fact, one of the local newspapers threatened Chicago Theological Seminary with financial ruin for harboring and teaching sociology which it denounced as being "not only identical with socialism but as a tributary to crime."

Sociologists, the newspaper explained, study crime until they lose their horror of it and thereupon relax the moral fiber of society.

I suspected it all along — didn't you? Who could not love Graham Taylor and Chicago Theological Seminary?

An interesting footnote is that while one paper was attacking him, the editor of the *Daily News*, Victor Lawson, was giving Chicago Theological Seminary the money for his salary.
[See J. C. McGiffert, *No Ivory Tower,* Ch. IV]

Graham Taylor believed that "people of faith and the religious institutions could make a difference in transforming individuals and society."

How fitting that his name is attached to an award presented this evening to a woman who has believed that all her life and, in fact, continues to make a difference in the lives of countless individuals and also the life of the City.

You are here because you know her and love her as I do. Her particular involvement and contribution to this institution and to many others in the community are listed and will be detailed later. But hear the criteria for the Graham Taylor Award and see if they do not strike you as a succinct description of Betty Reneker.

- Commitment to transforming the environment.
- Commitment to transforming public policy.
- The uplifting of the lives of all people particularly the marginal among us.
- A willingness to take leadership in bringing people together from all sectors for the promotion of the common good.
- A practical application of her faith to work the promise and pathos of our society.

That sounds like Betty to me and one wishes that at this peculiar moment in history, when politicians line up to do obeisance to Pat Robertson and Ralph Reid and James Dobson — that they might have the opportunity to hear Betty Reneker talk about Graham Taylor's religion, or better yet, see her in action.

We all do — because there is so much action and energy. I know her theological roots are deep in the tradition of Congregationalism and Puritanism but I confess I have a hard time thinking of Betty as a Puritan.
One night not long ago Sue and I were her guests at a lovely event at the Museum of Science and Industry. (Betty ran that place once upon a time too.) It was a wonderful evening; as always she was at her most gracious, bringing interesting people together, facilitating conversation.

As the evening wore on and the dinner proceeded, it became apparent that our table — Betty's guests — was being ignored by the servers. No entre'e materialized; the salad did and lots of wine, but as people around us were finishing dessert it became apparent that something had gone wrong. Now, most of us at that point take these things altogether too personally and start to become officious and obnoxious. Not Betty. She discreetly spoke with a waiter and food materialized — belatedly but deliciously.

But, in the process it had become a late night, Saturday, I recall. Now a clergy nightmare, next to losing the manuscript, is to get caught out too late. So we were driving north on the Outer Drive; I had a tuxedo on; it was midnight, not a time to get arrested for speeding. Can you see the headline? "Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church busted after late night party on South Side."

So — as I have learned to do — I tucked in behind the big car ahead. But it kept going faster and faster — exceeding the speed limit. I kept the pace and finally it dawned on us it was Betty — roaring up the Drive, almost midnight - no Puritan, she!

At her wonderful home on the lake guests are sometimes, regularly in fact, invited to climb an enormous sand dune — before cocktails; something she does without breathing hard. It's a wonderfully Puritan ritual: cocktails — but not until you break a sweat!

I know of no one who is a more appropriate recipient of the Graham Taylor Award. Betty Reneker's commitments to her family, her Church, her Country, this Seminary are something of the heart of the life of faith — lived openly and honestly and energetically and lovingly.

Betty is what Jean Bethke-Elshtain calls a Public Citizen.

We are, of course, doing more this evening than honoring a distinguished citizen. We are, I think, engaging in an act of corporate hope, affirming our deepest conviction that this world — this Nation — this City — can be a better place, a more just and gentle and compassionate place; affirming our deepest conviction that the Creator intends it that way; and that there are more important measurements of a society's viability than the market place alone. In fact, gathering here for this purpose, in the context of our recent political revolution, could almost be a defiant and counter-culture and prophetic act.

In her important book, *Democracy on Trial*, Jean Bethke-Elshtain (another of those troublesome Chicago Sociologists!) asks:

> "Have we democratic citizens become more fearful than hopeful?" And then elaborates — "Let me remind you of a few of our most paralyzing collective fears: the next generation's life will not be better than that of previous generations; America's position in the world will falter; communities will continue to disintegrate; families will continue to collapse; the center simply will not hold. Fearful, we retreat, or participate in the politics of resentment — finding someone or some group to blame for all our ills ... If the great Roman republican citizen Cicero lamented that 'we have lost the *res publica*' — I bemoan the loss of something similar — the *public citizen.*"

And then professor Elshtain describes Betty Reneker:

> "I embrace, as an alternative a new social covenant in which we reach out once more to our fellow citizens from a stance of good will and work to defuse our discontent, so we might forge working alliances across various groups." [pp. 37-38]

Immanuel Kant said there are three great questions:

- What can we know?
- What can we do?
- What can we hope for?

Betty Reneker, somewhere along the line, came up with answers. And over the years she has shown us all what we must do and what we can hope for.

It is an important lesson for all of us — to live intentionally; honestly, to do the work God needs doing in the world; and the work — Betty's Puritan forebears were absolutely certain — God calls us to do —

- To care for the children
- To feed the hungry
- To shelter the homeless
- To heal the sick
- To pray and love and work for justice

It's a precious vision. It is at the heart of the life of this institution, and at the center of the life of an extraordinary woman, and, I submit, at the core of a strong and only hope for the future.

> "He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the Lord require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God?" [Micah 6:8]

Thank you, Betty Reneker, for showing us how to do just that.